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## From Penitence to Charity: The Practice of Piety in Counter-Reformation Paris

BY

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I am very much a historian—one trained and habituated to the search for archival documents, and one used to seeking the historical roots and identifying the historical context of social and cultural phenomena. This led me in my work on the massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day to find the origins of that horrible outburst of violence not just in a political conspiracy but also in the deep religious turmoil of mid-sixteenth-century Paris. Because it became obvious that intense, militant religious belief had shaped the outward behavior of both Protestants and Catholics, it was almost natural that I decided to pursue

the phenomenon of religiosity in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

My work on the practice of piety in Counter Reformation Paris is very much a work in progress. Undoubtedly some of my arguments will be modified, and certainly they will be extended, since today I will be discussing what I see as the more distant origins of the social apostolate embodied in the charitable endeavors of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. These activities are most commonly explained against the background of the economic crises of the seventeenth century—the rising tide of poverty, and the acute misery spawned by the Fronde. I will look instead at an earlier period of economic crisis and political turmoil and at the religious awakening this period brought forth. My setting is the Paris of the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion and, in particular, the last, desperate gasp of these wars, when an arch-Catholic League held sway in Paris and denied entry to Henry IV, France's legitimate king. My setting is thus the Paris into which Louise

de Marillac was born in April 1591 and where she spent her youth. I will argue that the benevolent piety that characterizes the Vincentian heritage was the product of an evolving spirituality born of the anguish of the religious wars, and that the penitential strain in this piety first turned it inwards, into a mystical, ascetic, and contemplative mode, but later resurfaced in an ethic of Christian service that had at its heart the imitation of Christ.

I will be focusing on female piety. It is the women's story in particular that I wish to tell. This can, I think, help us to understand not only the early experiences of Louise de Marillac, but, more broadly, the spiritual heritage of the Ladies of Charity, about whom Sister Louise Sullivan will have more to say. Virtually ignored in most studies of the religious wars, women were nevertheless thoroughly caught up in the religious enthusiasm of the times. They shared in the fierce militancy of League politics and in the extreme (sometimes life-threatening) asceticism introduced during this period by such reformed monastic orders as the Capuchins and Feuillants. They also participated fully—perhaps even led the way—in the transition from a mystical piety in which the individual sought annihilation through union with Christ on the cross to the more humble path of seeking Christ through service to the wretched and poor.

I will illustrate this transition with two particular examples, representing the first two generations of a three-stage evolution of which the third generation might be represented by Louise de Marillac herself. The first generation was a small one; its members can be considered precursors rather than founders of the new spirituality. They came of age during the 1560s and 1570s, during the first violent phase of the French religious wars, and are typified by a Parisian bourgeoisie named Marie Du Drac (1544-1590), whom I shall use to illustrate their penitential and self-effacing piety. The second generation, the real founders of the Catholic Reformation in Paris, came of age during the 1580s and 1590s and are typified by Barbe Aurillot, better known as Madame Acarie (1566-1619) and famous for her role in bringing the Discalced Carmelites of Saint Teresa of Avila to France. She illustrates both the mystic's desire to lose herself in union with Christ and the desire to imitate Christ's suffering by seeking out the most humble forms of Christian service. The third generation, those who came of age after 1600 and participated in the full flowering of the Catholic Reformation in Paris—Louise de Marillac among them—built on the heroic example of these previous generations in more ways than are commonly recog-

nized. Their piety retained a certain ascetic flavor, though their imitation of Christ gradually shifted its focus from his suffering on the cross to the example of his life.

Without seeking to diminish the role attributed to François de Sales, Vincent de Paul, or others traditionally considered “fathers” of the Catholic Reformation in France, I want to show the deeper roots of the spirituality they sought to nurture and set to use. I want to point out that it did not take a François de Sales to introduce Parisian women to the “devout life.” They came in great numbers to hear him, a ready audience for his famous Paris sermons of 1602, because they were already attuned to the message he had to deliver. He wrote his *Introduction to the Devout Life* in response to a perceived need, but let us be clear: it was not the need to convert frivolous, worldly women to a more authentic Christian life, but rather the need to give reassurance and guidance to women who had already begun to seek a truer devotion. It did not take a Vincent de Paul to teach Parisian women that they had a Christian duty to the poor of their parishes. Rather, Vincent’s contribution was to help provide the support structures needed to organize a charitable impulse that was already, if somewhat inconsistently, being expressed.

Before I turn to the specific examples with which I have chosen to illustrate my argument, I need to say a few more words about the ascetic and mystical piety whose roots I have located in the tumult of religious war. This upsurge of penitential piety is well described in Denis Crouzet’s recent book, *Les guerriers de Dieu*, which documents the atmosphere of panic and fear of God’s impending judgment that pervaded the French Wars of Religion.<sup>1</sup> Crouzet explains how, interpreting the spread of heresy in biblical terms as a sign that the final days had arrived, Catholic preachers warned their listeners that God was angry and his punishment near. Catholic violence during the religious wars was, in Crouzet’s definition, a frantic search for reunion with an angry God. He argues that the period of overt violence that began with the wars climaxed with the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew’s Day in August 1572, after which a process of reaction set in, and violence was interiorized. It found expression in writings of incredible virulence but also in acts of penitence and ritual humiliation intended as acts of

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<sup>1</sup>Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525-vers 1610*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1990). The summary of Crouzet’s argument given below draws upon my review of the book in the *American Historical Review* (forthcoming).

reparation, as a new path to union with God. In Crouzet's analysis, the Holy Union of the Catholic League, the radical faction that was dominant in Paris between 1588 and 1594, was the ultimate expression of this millenarian piety. It represented an attempt on the part of "true Catholics" to mobilize against the disorder, tyranny, and oppression that appeared to threaten the ruin of the kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

Depicting the League as a "spiritual crusade," Crouzet emphasizes popular participation in its processions and rituals of expiation. He further demonstrates how agency was inverted during the League, so that, for example, the assassination of King Henry III was seen not as the work of one impassioned man but rather as a "miracle" proceeding from the collective movement of the people toward God.<sup>3</sup> Crouzet's stimulating analysis of the League forces us to rethink events that have for too long been interpreted as having been motivated largely by a combination of social tensions and political rivalries.<sup>4</sup> He puts religion back into the picture, not as a colorful sideshow—a pageant of friars carrying muskets—but as a causative element. He shows how the events of the League were firmly rooted in the religious mentality of the age.

Although I agree with much of Crouzet's analysis, I must fault him for depicting the League as the final, dramatic outburst of an essentially medieval millenarianism. Contrasting the faith of the Leaguers with that of their opponents of the Politique party, he makes the latter appear modern and rational, the wave of the future. The God they sought within, through self-knowledge, is made to appear quite different from—much more "modern" than—the God the Leaguers sought to appease through processions, rituals of expiation, and the violence of civil war. The faith of the Leaguers, collective and externalized, appears by contrast as an aberration, an apocalyptic moment whose only residue was a kind of nostalgic despair. This analysis, however, turns a blind eye to the major religious development of the seventeenth

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<sup>2</sup>Crouzet, *Guerriers de Dieu*, 2:367.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:485.

<sup>4</sup>Recent works on the League include John H. M. Salmon, "The Paris Sixteen, 1584-1594: The Social Analysis of a Revolutionary Movement," *Journal of Modern History* 44 (1972):540-76; Arlette Lebigre, *La révolution des curés: Paris, 1588-1594* (Paris: 1980); Elie Barnavi, *Le parti de Dieu: Étude sociale et politique des chefs de la Ligue parisienne, 1585-1594* (Louvain: 1980); Robert Descimon, *Qui étaient les Seize? Mythes et réalités de la Ligue parisienne (1585-1594)* (Paris: 1983); Elie Barnavi and Robert Descimon, *La sainte Ligue, le juge et la potence. L'assassinat du président Brisson (15 novembre 1591)* (Paris: 1985); and Denis Richet, "Politique et religion: Les processions à Paris en 1589," in *La France d'ancien régime. Études réunies en l'honneur de Pierre Goubert*, ed. Alain Croix, Jean Jacquart, and Francois Lebrun (Toulouse: 1984), 2:623-32. Only the last pays significant attention to religious beliefs and activities.

century, the great Catholic renewal that produced the celebrated "generation of saints." The roots of this renewal, I would argue, must be sought in the spirituality of the League. The processions of the League were just the most public display of a new piety that, among some members of Parisian society at least, was both interiorized and transformative. In public or private, this piety was highly penitential, and we must take its penitential character seriously, searching out its origins and direction, rather than dismissing it as apocalyptic hysteria.

We can begin by recognizing two distinct yet related sources for the ascetic character the new piety was to assume. If one source lay in the fear of damnation stirred by the experience of the civil wars, as Crouzet has suggested, another sprang from a natural revulsion against the distressing evidence of pride, greed, and sloth exhibited by the unreformed Church. The new asceticism was a way of remaking the Church from within. The reformed religious orders that played a such prominent role in France during the Wars of Religion—the Minims, Capuchins, and Feuillants—owed their inspiration, but also much of their popularity, to this sentiment. The austerities practiced by members of these orders gave them a special credibility among the Parisian populace and inspired emulation within the elite.

Even at the outset of the wars, the Parisian public was strongly attracted to preachers whose ascetic piety complemented the vigor of their denunciations of the Protestant heretics. The Minim Jean de Hans, for example, was a hero to the Parisians during the period just prior to the first religious war. Arrested by the king on the charge of seditious preaching, de Hans was released at the request of the city's leaders and accompanied back to the city in a celebratory procession. The Parisians admired his saintly life as much as his courageous oratory, and they whispered to one another that he wore a hair shirt under his habit. When he died in December 1562, even though he died of the plague, Parisian women gathered around his corpse to touch it with their rosary beads and draw some blessing from his saintliness.<sup>5</sup>

The Italian Capuchins, established in France in 1574, won over an initially suspicious populace (they were suspected of being agents of a foreign power) by their selfless devotion in aiding victims of the horrible plague of 1580. The self-abnegation and literal interpretation of

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<sup>5</sup>Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York and Oxford: 1991), 145. See also Claude Haton, *Mémoires contenant le récit des événements accomplis de 1553 à 1582*, ed. Félix Bourquelot, 2 vols. (Paris: 1857), 1:214-21.

the meaning of Franciscan poverty exhibited by the order won it patronage from the king himself and inspired professions from among the high nobility and the judicial aristocracy. Beginning in the 1580s and 1590s we find Capuchins everywhere serving as preachers, confessors, and spiritual directors to a newly emerging Catholic elite. They played an important role in establishing within this elite an interiorized spirituality characterized by a strict regime of mortification and mental prayer.<sup>6</sup> (It is not surprising that Louise de Marillac's first known spiritual director was a provincial of the Paris Capuchins, Father Honoré de Champigny, or that in her middle teens she wanted nothing more than to join the newly established sister house, the Daughters of the Passion, or Capucines. The key role played by this order, however, in the evolution of Parisian spiritual life dates back beyond her birth.<sup>7</sup>)

Equally influential, and even more ascetic, were the reformed Cistercians known as Feuillants, after the Gascon monastery where the congregation got its start. Founded in 1577 by the monastery's new abbot, Jean de la Barrière, the Feuillants adopted such a strict form of the rule of Saint Benedict that they lived on a single daily meal of black bread, roots, and vegetables—the latter often left raw as a form of penitence and in order to waste less time in food preparation. Although the rule permitted some use of milk products and fruits, many Feuillants thought this was to treat their bodies too kindly, and they extended the daily morning fast to three days or more of total abstinence, while continuing to expend their energy in preaching and manual labor. They further mortified their bodies by going barefoot and bareheaded and wearing only a simple tunic, summer and winter, except in the church choir or when attending to business outside of the monastery. They slept on a bit of straw with a single cover and ate on the ground without tables or chairs. They spoke only when necessary, using signs whenever possible to avoid breaking the silence. Their aim, according to the founder was “not only to raise the mind above the body for the greater glory of God, but to do so in such fashion that the body not only did not oppose the mind in its path to perfection but aided it usefully in this career, even if it was as if by force, and through its own destruction.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Jean Mauzaize, *Le rôle et l'action des Capucins de la Province de Paris dans la France religieuse du XVIIème siècle* (Thesis defended before the Université de Paris IV, 30 June 1977) (Lille, 1978), 3 vols., 1:40-69, 244-58.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M. *Louise de Marillac* (New York: 1970), 19-20.

<sup>8</sup>*Histoire de la fondation du monastère des religieuses feuillantines de Toulouse. Avec les eloges de plusieurs religieuses de cette maison, remarquables par leurs vertus. Par un religie ux feuillant [sic]* (Bordeaux: 1696), 13.

In practice, the regime proved so debilitating that Pope Clement VIII, shocked by the massive death rate exhibited in the Feuillants' Roman convent, intervened in 1592 to impose a less stringent rule on the order, which he feared might otherwise vanish entirely.<sup>9</sup>

Even so, the order remained extreme in its austerity, and what is intriguing is the appeal this asceticism seemed to have, both for men, who flocked to the new order and gave it an incredible rate of growth, and for women, who were inspired by the Feuillants' preaching and began to imitate their lives. In 1587, King Henry III, impressed by reports of the Feuillants' piety, asked Jean de la Barrière to send him sixty monks to establish a monastery in Paris. He sent a guard of sixty horsemen to protect them on their trip, which they made in a barefoot procession that drew out crowds wherever they passed.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, a convent for women was being established back in Gascony. De la Barrière had initially tried to discourage his female followers by emphasizing the harshness of the Feuillants' penitential practices, but the women insisted that they too had "bodies capable of suffering, and wills as generous as those of men to undertake the sacrifice of their bodies."<sup>11</sup> "Laying claim to the same salvation [as men]," the women demanded that "they should purchase it at the same price, and arrive at it by a road as narrow and as rude."<sup>12</sup> De la Barrière put them off for several years in order to test their will, but their numbers only grew larger. Finally in 1588 they were rewarded with a convent in a small town near the abbaye des Feuillants. They moved to Toulouse in 1599, when they outgrew their first quarters.

If the Feuillantines had had their way, they would have soon established additional houses elsewhere in France. The pressure was particularly strong from generous donors who sought to found a house in Paris, but the Feuillant fathers were unwilling to take on the direction of more female souls, and they refused to authorize more houses until 1622, when Queen Anne of Austria's desire to see the Feuillantines established in Paris proved too strong to resist.<sup>13</sup> But what is fascinating is that in the meantime, strong-minded Parisian women were so at-

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<sup>9</sup>Antoine de Saint-Pierre [Lejeune], *La vie du reverend pere dom Eustache de Saint-Paul Asseline, docteur de Sorbonne & religieux de la Congregation de Notre Dame de Feuillens [sic]. Ensemble quelques opuscules spirituels utiles, aux ames pieuses & religieuses* (Paris: 1646), 95.

<sup>10</sup>Antoine de Saint-Pierre, *Vie du R.P. dom Eustache de Saint-Paul Asseline*, 99-100.

<sup>11</sup>*Histoire des feuillantines*, 26.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 55-65.



tracted to the austere congregation that they talked their parents into taking them clear to Toulouse to join the convent there—or even, like Antoinette d’Orléans, duchesse de Longueville, ran away to become Feuillantines.<sup>14</sup> Biographers of Antoinette d’Orléans recount the pleasure that this princess of France took in exceeding even the austerities prescribed by the Feuillantines’ rule. Straw was too soft, so she slept on the bare ground. Of course she wore a hair shirt, scourged herself, and engaged in other forms of corporal discipline. She fasted strictly, consuming little but bread and water during Lent, and taking a special pleasure in her turn as the sister designated to serve the others at meals, so that she might take the smallest and worst pieces for herself. Sometimes she was seen to take bits of meat so spoiled that the other nuns had to snatch them from her hands so that she did not make herself sick by eating them.<sup>15</sup>

Members of the reformed orders preached austerity as well as practicing it, and in doing so they helped change the character of lay piety as well. Brother Antoine Estienne, for example, a Minim, made his mark during the religious wars as a preacher of penitential conduct. He called on his listeners to pay heed to the dangerous times, to mend their ways, so as to appease the anger of God. Brother Antoine called on women in particular to end their displays of excessive vanity and dissoluteness. He told them to imitate the Roman matron, Saint Paula, who cried herself nearly blind in repentance for her sins. When Saint Jerome counseled Paula to save her eyes for reading Holy Scripture, the virtuous matron replied to the contrary that “it is necessary to besmirch this face, which, against the commandment of our Lord, I have often painted; it is necessary to afflict this body, which has been given over to so many delights; the laughter must be repaid by perpetual tears.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 71. Madeleine de Saint-Jean (Sublet des Noyers), daughter of the Parisian maître des comptes Jean Sublet and his wife Madeleine Bochart, convinced her parents to allow her to join the order in 1599 at the age of fifteen. As the historian of the Feuillantines of Toulouse expressed it, “Her pious parents did not dare oppose the will of God and they brought her themselves to Toulouse to sacrifice her by their own hand.” Madeleine’s younger sister, known in religion as Marie de Saint-Benoît, insisted on being taken to Toulouse at only twelve years of age. Because she was so young, she was not allowed to make her profession until she was sixteen in 1604. The saga of the duchesse de Longueville’s flight is recounted by the abbé Annoncia Bazy, *Vie du venerable Jean de la Barrière, abbé et reformateur de l’abbaye des Feuillants, fondateur de la congrégation des Feuillants & des Feuillantines, etc., et ses rapports avec Henri III, roi de France* (Toulouse: 1885), 332-57.

<sup>15</sup>Bazy, *Vie de Jean de la Barrière*, 356-57, citing the manuscript “*Vie de Madame d’Orléans, dite de Sainte Scholastique, fondatrice de l’Ordre du Calvaire, composée par le R.P. Dom Damien Lermnier, religieux de l’Ordre de Saint-Benoît et de la Congrégation de Saint-Maur*” (1656), in the Bibliothèque de la ville de Toulouse.

<sup>16</sup>F. A. E. M. [Frère Antoine Estienne, minime], *Remonstrance charitable aux dames et damoysselles de France, sur leurs ornemens dissolus, pour les induire à laisser l’habit du Paganisme, & prendre celui de la femme pudique et Chrestienne* (Paris: 1585), f. 32. A first edition was published in 1570.

In 1570, when he first published his *Remonstrance charitable*, Estienne was still a voice crying in the wilderness, but penitential themes became increasingly common in Parisian sermons and polemics.<sup>17</sup> In 1576, René Benoist, the cure of Paris's large and wealthy parish of Saint Eustache, published an *Avertissement charitable* addressed to the women of Paris in which he repeated the essential message of Brother Antoine's *Remonstrance*. Advising women and young girls how they should conduct themselves if they wished to gain the plenary indulgence promised in that jubilee year, Benoist told them to dress themselves not as worldly, carnal creatures but rather as penitents, and he urged on them the public display of repentant tears, so as to open the eyes of others who were being led astray by their sins.<sup>18</sup>

It is doubtful that such recommendations had much immediate impact on Parisian women, but they did fall on some receptive ears. My first example of the impact of the new piety on the Parisian laity is Brother Antoine Estienne's own spiritual daughter, Marie Du Drac. The wife and daughter of Parisian magistrates, she comes from exactly the same elite social milieu that was later to spawn the women whose ostensible piety earned them the nickname of *dévotés*. Indeed, she was the aunt by marriage of the best known of the *dévotés*, Madame Acarie, who was strongly influenced by her example. Already in the 1570s, Marie's conduct shows the influence of penitential models, and I offer her here as an example of the early penetration of the religious values that were more clearly to mark the following generation.

Born in 1544, Marie Du Drac was married in 1561 at the age of seventeen. She bore her husband seven children in twelve years of marriage and, after his death, vowed not to remarry but rather to devote her life to God alone. Even during her marriage Marie began to leave aside the "vanities of this world."<sup>19</sup> Moved by a strong fear of the Last Judgment, she abandoned her jewelry and worldly attire. She covered her blond hair, which she had been accustomed to dress elaborately, in the style of the day, and donned garments so severe that friends and

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<sup>17</sup>Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 150-58.

<sup>18</sup>René Benoist, *Avertissement charitable aux femmes et filles enseignant comme elles doivent aller aux stations & lieux ordonnés pour gagner le present Jubilé de ceste année 1576 ordonné en ceste ville de Paris depuis le 22 juillet jusques au 22 d'octobre ensuivant* (Paris: 1577), f. Biiia.

<sup>19</sup>F. Aestienne, Minime [Brother François Estienne], *Oraison funebre, faicte sur le trespas de noble & vertueuse damoiselle Marie Dudrac, en son vivant veufve de feu noble homme, maistre Jacques Aurillot, jadis conseiller du roy en son Parlement de Phris, en laquelle sont amplement declarees plusieurs choses admirables, avec les rares vertus & graces speciales, dont la dessusdicte damoiselle a esté douée de Dieu, par sa tresgrande liberalité & bonté infinie* (Paris: 1590), f. 13v.

relatives expressed their shock. Beneath these robes, she wore a rough hair shirt. Often she fastened a four-inch horsehair strap tightly around her loins as well. She mortified her already frail body with fasts so extreme that they injured her health. Indeed, when she fell ill shortly after the death of her husband, the doctors informed her that she needed a cook more than a physician, she had so debilitated her poor stomach.<sup>20</sup>

Marie set about reforming her interior life with the same vigor that she applied to her exterior, or so her biographer—and spiritual director—Brother Antoine Estienne tells us. She examined her conscience so scrupulously that she spent long hours in confession, returning to her confessor day after day to add some new little sin she had just remembered. In 1570 she began to experience a form of mystical trance that both she and Estienne describe as being “drunk with God.”<sup>21</sup> The first trance began on Passion Sunday, with the words of absolution that followed her usual, tearful confession. The burst of joy that she experienced at this time lasted five or six days, during which period she stayed alone as much as possible, because she could not conceal her state of “spiritual inebriation” from those around her.

This is not the place to narrate in detail Marie’s increasingly rich spiritual life. Several aspects of this life, however, do merit our attention, if only because of the frequency with which similar phenomena recur in the following generation. Initially untutored in mystical theology, Marie soon acquired spiritual advisers who instructed her in mental prayer and deepened her theological understanding of the experiences she was already having. These experiences remained highly somatic: her fragile body felt about to burst from the “force and violence” with which she was visited by the Holy Spirit; her breast burned so hotly from “the fire of God’s love” that she had to keep a glass of water by her bed and a damp cloth which to cool herself, so as not to faint. She began to experience violent seizures, falling to the floor in a faint and appearing so dead to the world that even pricking her with a pin could not bring her to herself.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes in her ecstasies, she had visions, and Estienne attributes to her several prophecies as well. Although several of the *dévotés*, including Madame Acarie, also experienced mystical trances, had visions, and uttered prophecies, these particular manifestations of Marie Du Drac’s spirituality interest me here less than the fact

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., ff. 13-14.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., ff. 49 and 15-16.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., ff. 20-24.

that her experience of an intense and internalized spiritual life preceded any effective guidance by a spiritual director or learned appreciation of mystic theology. She followed her own, highly personal methods of communing with God before anyone instructed her in the techniques of mental prayer.

And if she prized above all the contemplative life—she had had a strong inclination for religious life before her marriage and thought seriously of joining the Minimes in her widowhood—she did not enter a convent or enclose herself entirely in her study but rather engaged actively in works of Christian charity. Not content with distributing alms, she went into the hospitals to help feed and tend the patients and into the homes of poor invalids. Like the Ladies of Charity two generations later, she took along a servant to help her clean and bind wounds and to apply special unguents she made herself, but she did not shrink from contact with the patients or refuse to touch their putrid wounds.<sup>23</sup> She also went into the prisons to bring hope to the prisoners, and she worked to secure their release, paying their debts herself if this was what was required to free them.

Marie's faith was humble in the extreme. Asked by her spiritual director to write an account of the special blessings God had given her, she wrote instead of her excess of sin, and, fearing that even her religious scruples were not without pride, she ended by asking above all for a docile heart, "so that she might know perfectly her faults and do true penitence for them before death should overtake her."<sup>24</sup> Her faith was Christocentric, focused on Christ's passion and, above all, on his cross. She had a vision of Christ, wrapped in a purple robe and crowned with a crown of thorns, holding a reed, and bleeding "in all the parts of his sacred body," saying "'O my daughter, see how much I have suffered for you.'"<sup>25</sup> In letters to her spiritual children, she also emphasized meditation on the cross. "Do you wish to acquire humility," she wrote, "go to the cross. See how the son of God humiliated himself." Poverty, charity, obedience—all were to be found in Christ on the cross.<sup>26</sup>

Marie's faith was also characterized by a deep hunger for the Eucharist, which she took as often as possible—though not as often as she would have liked. Even thinking about taking communion or

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., ff. 34v-37r.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., ff. 48-49.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., f. 28.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., f. 67v.

entering a church where the Eucharist was displayed could suffice to provoke an intense surge of joy, and her consciousness of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist was such that she often remarked that, "if the misguided heretics . . . had only tasted the unmistakable delights with which her soul had been divinely nourished, this would have been more than sufficient to convert them from their heresy and bring them back into the bosom of our holy mother church."<sup>27</sup>

As this last quotation suggests, Marie was fervently devoted to the arch-Catholic cause in the French Wars of Religion. She supported the League financially—Estienne writes that she spared "neither gold, nor silver, nor any of the means that God had given her" to aid in its affairs<sup>28</sup>—but she also gave it her deepest loyalty. The intensely emotional character of her partisanship is typified by her remark, when informed that a friend's son was serving in the Huguenot army, that she "would rather . . . have no children than to have ones like that, who were not supporters of the League."<sup>29</sup> Marie Du Drac died in September 1590, shortly after the second siege of Paris was lifted, and among her last recorded words are her expressions of pleasure to see "the Béarnais" [King Henry IV] confounded and her native city once again supplied with grain.<sup>30</sup> Marie did not live to see the final trials of the League, but there is little reason to think that her political loyalties would have been altered by the experience.

Although I am convinced that Marie Du Drac's interiorized and intensely personal spirituality was not unique in her generation, I cannot in truth offer much evidence to this effect. Her closest friend, Anne Le Lieur, is said to have been her "emulator in piety and mystic grace," but I have been unable to learn more about Anne Le Lieur—even though, ironically, she was the widow of one of the Paris city councilors about whom I wrote my first book.<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, our sources multiply for the generation of the League, and we can see many of the features that characterized Marie Du Drac's spirituality reappear in the biographies of this founding generation of the Catholic Reformation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., f. 16.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., f. 44.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., f. 43.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., f. 43.

<sup>31</sup>Bruno de Jésus-Marie, O.C.D., *La belle Acarie: Bienheureuse Marie de l'Incarnation* (Paris: 1942),

We can recognize in the *dévotés* the penitential fervor, extremes of asceticism, and mystical trances characteristic of Marie Du Drac, but also her humble service to society's outcasts, the sick, and the poor. Like Marie, the *dévotés* focused their piety on Christ's passion, and they hungered for the Eucharist. Although some biographers gloss over any involvement in the political events of the era, it is clear for many of the *dévotés* that their faith was politically charged.

Madame Acarie follows her aunt Marie Du Drac's model so closely that one must wonder whether the emulation was conscious. We know very little about the personal relationship between the two women. One of Barbe Acarie's cousins mentioned in his testimony for her beatification that, as a young girl, she frequently sought out the company of Marie Du Drac, who was after all the wife of her father's brother and lived quite near her own family.<sup>33</sup> Was Barbe simply drawn to a loving aunt who had children near her own age, or was there more to the attraction? We cannot know. Nor can we read more than the natural ties of kinship into Marie's role as godmother to Barbe's third son or the role that Barbe's husband, Pierre Acarie, played as financial administrator for Marie's children after her death.<sup>34</sup> From what little evidence does exist, we can, I think, conclude that Barbe Aurillot was not one of Marie's "spiritual children." Barbe's spiritual awakening occurred only in the very last years of Marie's life. Her first mystical trance, which took place in a chapel of her parish church of Saint Gervais, probably occurred

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<sup>33</sup>See, for example, various Carmelite biographies in the *Chroniques de l'Ordre des Carmélites de la Réforme de Sainte Thérèse depuis leur introduction en France*, 5 vols. (Troyes: 1856); Antoine de Saint-Pierre, *Vie du R.P. dom Eustache de Saint-Paul Asseline*, 498-506; Bazy, *Vie de Jean de la Barrière*, 337-63; [Marc de Bauduen], *La vie admirable de tres-haute, tres-puissante, tres-illustre et tres-vertueuse dame Charlotte Marguerite de Gondy, Marquise de Magnelais* (Paris: 1666); Marie de Beauvilliers, *Conférences spirituelles d'une supérieure à ses religieuses*, ed. L. Gaugreau (Paris, n.d.); Jacques Gallement, "Eloge de la V.M. Marie de Hanivel de la Sainte Trinité, carmelite," in Placide Gallement, *La vie du venerable prestre de J.C. M. Jacques Gallement, docteur en theologie de la faculté de Paris, premier superieur des Carmelites en France* (Paris: 1663); Henri de Leymont, *Madame de Sainte-Beuve et les Ursulines de Paris (1562-1630). Étude sur l'éducation des femmes en France au XVIIe siècle*, 2nd ed. (Lyons: n.d.). See also Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotés: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal and Kingston: 1990), 17-21. Although a welcome addition to the literature on women and religion in seventeenth-century France, Rapley's book deals only briefly with the origins of the *dévotés* and their spirituality.

<sup>34</sup>Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 5-6, citing testimony of Charles Le Prévost, baron d'Oysonville, *Procès apostolique*, f. 479 (Archives of the Carmelites of Pontoise; not currently open to the public).

<sup>35</sup>Bibliothèque nationale [hereinafter cited as BN], *Pièces originales* 145: Aurillot, nos. 16 and 132. It is intriguing that Pierre Acarie bought up as many copies as possible of Estienne's biography of Marie Du Drac in order to give them to his friends, but he was also acting to keep the book out of the hands of opponents of the League, who claimed it betrayed more superstition than true religion. It is natural to want to protect the reputation of one's kin, and we should not read too much meaning into this gesture. See Pierre de L'Estoile, *Journal de L'Estoile pour le règne de Henri IV*, ed. Louis-Raymond Lefèvre, 2 vols., 1: 1589-1600 (Paris: 1948), 43.

within a month or two of Marie's death.<sup>35</sup> I suspect that she was strongly marked by her aunt's example, but that she found in her a model for emulation rather than a spiritual guide or teacher.

Whatever the relationship between the two women, their piety shares several distinctive traits. Both women were strongly drawn to the cloister in childhood but married in response to parental wishes, and, if Marie thought of taking religious vows in widowhood, Barbe did so. Before her marriage she had acted out her desire to become a nun by practicing private mortifications—deliberately exposing herself to cold, and eating only the worst bits of food at the table. She dressed as simply as obedience to her parents' and then her husband's notions of family honor would allow, and even after her marriage she continued whenever possible to eat only the coarsest bread and simplest foods.<sup>36</sup> From the mid-1590s, she had another way to mortify her flesh, living as she did in constant pain from a broken hip that had mended badly. Still, her desire for physical suffering was so great that she hated to be forced to coddle or even to bring comfort to her body; she hated to see that "enemy" at its ease.<sup>37</sup> When her husband was exiled and his property confiscated for his active role in the League, she took what we might consider a perverse delight in the humiliation this reversal of affairs forced upon her.<sup>38</sup> The secret of her joy lay in her sense of thus participating in Christ's own humiliation.

The beginning of Barbe's spiritual enlightenment is usually attributed to the reading of pious works her husband supplied her in order to cure her taste for the romantic literature popular at the time. It is nevertheless true that her spiritual experiences very quickly assumed a frightening intensity. For several years, she hesitated to speak of the mystical trances that immobilized her, numbing her senses and causing her to lose all consciousness of time. Only in 1592 did she acquire a spiritual director who was able to reassure her that these experiences were special graces bestowed by a loving God and not malign fantasies of demonic origin. Like Marie Du Drac, her sense of unworthiness had caused her to mistrust her own experience.<sup>39</sup> Barbe Acarie's household

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<sup>35</sup>Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 48n, theorizes that the trance took place between July and November 1590. Marie Du Drac died in September 1590.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 12-13, 18-19, and 99.

<sup>37</sup>Daniel Hervé, Congregation of the Oratory, *La vie chrétienne de la vénérable Soeur Marie de l'Incarnation, fondatrice des Carmélites en France* (Paris: 1666), 178-79.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 150-52; See also Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 153 and 162.

<sup>39</sup>Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 48, 60, 125-28.

soon became a gathering point for many of the most learned theologians and spiritually gifted clerics of her age, but, as with Marie Du Drac, she took the first steps on her own. Counsel and understanding came later.

In the long run, the reading of mystical theology played less of a role in Barbe's spirituality than it had in Marie's, for she quickly reached a stage where reading works of piety brought on such powerful emotions that she could not follow the words on the page. Indeed, she fought to resist the ecstatic trances, which were so overwhelming that they deprived her of sight, hearing, and speech.<sup>40</sup> The intensity of her spiritual communion was also manifest in invisible stigmata that pained her greatly, particularly on Fridays and during Lent.

The stigmata are themselves strong evidence of the Christocentric character of Barbe Acarie's piety and its focus on Christ's passion and sacrifice. Her spiritual exercises, although largely a pastiche of earlier writers, reinforce the same theme. She meditates at length on Christ's suffering on the cross, the agony of his wounds and the spilling of "his precious blood," and she writes about taking her own sins and plunging them into Christ's "very dear wounds, to be lost and consumed . . . in the fire of [his] divine love."<sup>41</sup> "Wash me, sweet Jesus, in your precious blood; cure me and sanctify me perfectly," she asks, so that she might receive the sacrament of the altar "and the virtue and efficacy that it contains."<sup>42</sup> Meditation on the broken body of Christ crucified was thus preparation for the Eucharist, whose healing powers she sought daily. Yes, in an era when most Catholics took communion but once a year, Barbe Acarie participated on a daily basis in the sacrament of the altar, unless illness or particular duties made this impossible.<sup>43</sup> Despite the difficulty she had in walking because of her injured hip, she crossed Paris and climbed to the abbaye Sainte Geneviève to hear mass on an almost daily basis, for she had a particular devotion to the city's patron saint. But she also frequently attended mass in her parish church of Saint Gervais and, by special permission of the bishop, had it celebrated

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<sup>40</sup>Archives nationales [hereinafter cited as AN], M233, document 3: [Dom Sans de Sainte Catherine], "Points notables de la vie de la bienheureuse soeur Marie de l'Incarnation, Carmelite, laquelle en la vie seculiere se nommoit Mademoiselle Acarye" (Paris, 12 September 1619). See also Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 60.

<sup>41</sup>Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 727-47: "Exercices spirituels;" quoted passages are from pages 733-34 and 730.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 731.

<sup>43</sup>AN, M233, dossier 3: testimony of Dom Sans de Sainte Catherine (unpaginated).



in the chapel of her house. Sometimes five or six masses a day were served in the Acarie residence, as each of the prestigious churchmen who frequented the Acarie circle slipped away in turn from the common discussion to the adjoining chapel to celebrate the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>44</sup>

It may sound as if Barbe Acarie spent all her time hearing mass or lost in her own religious trances. Quite the contrary, and despite her poor health, she was energetic and determined when it came to exercising her household responsibilities and at least as active in her service to the poor as Marie Du Drac had been. Barbe Acarie's early biographers considered her to have been the first to revive the ancient custom of Parisian women of good family going out among the indigent to assist them in their homes and tend them in hospitals. We know that this is untrue; Marie Du Drac had adopted the practice a generation earlier. Still, it was clearly as yet a novelty for a sheltered bourgeoisie like Barbe to pass whole days in the Hôtel Dieu caring for the sick and washing the dead, or to make regular rounds to visit invalids laid up in their homes, much less to tend wounded soldiers brought in from the wars of the League. According to her biographers, Madame Acarie sought out the worst jobs in the hospitals. Overcoming her natural revulsion against the sight and smell of pus-filled wounds, she assisted with amputations and cleaned out the most horribly gangrenous sores.<sup>45</sup> She went into the prisons as well and made a special cause of trying to rescue young women from life on the streets. She sometimes took friends with her on her rounds, and when her own poor health prevented her from going out to visit the sick, she sent these women in her stead, thereby encouraging the imitation of her charitable behavior. One of the witnesses for her beatification proceedings relates how, one time when Barbe was very sick, she was visited by some great ladies, including the dowager duchess of Longueville, who asked if they might stay and watch over her. Thanking them, she directed them, if they wished to be charitable, to visit instead a poor vinegar maker who lived nearby, adding that he was sicker than she and in far greater need of assistance.<sup>46</sup>

Barbe Acarie had a talent for mobilizing people to do the things that needed to be done. The story of her vision of Saint Teresa, who told her

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<sup>44</sup>Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 192.

<sup>45</sup>Hervé, *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation*, 120-23; Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 100-101.

<sup>46</sup>Hervé, *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation*, 120-21. See also, for example, the brief biography of Sister Jeanne de Jésus (d'Auvergne) in the *Chroniques de l'Ordre des Carmélites*, 3:201, which shows how the practice was spreading by imitation.

that she was to bring the Discalced Carmelites to France, is a famous one; but what really deserves to be known are the energy and organizational skills with which she made this vision become a reality. Not content with writing letters and seeking sponsorship for the project, she personally recruited the first French novices for the order and established them in her own house. When the bustling activity of this middle-class family with children proved unsuitable for the nurturing of contemplative vocations, she set them up in a "seminary" of their own near the abbaye Sainte Geneviève. She personally supervised construction of the convent that was being built for the new order, going out daily to the construction site to inspect the work and make the decisions necessary so that it could progress.<sup>47</sup> And, although most famous for her role in establishing the Carmelites in France, she deserves no less credit for helping to establish the Ursuline order in Paris. Several of the girls chosen for the little "seminary" of Sainte Geneviève had proved unsuited to the contemplative life of Carmelites, and, once the others were established as postulants, the question remained of what to do with these. Agreeing with her friend Jacques Gallement that the best way to use their talents would be to employ them as teachers to young girls of the community, Madame Acarie secured the benevolent patronage of a kinswoman, Madeleine Luillier (more commonly known by her married name as "Madame de Sainte-Beuve"), and set about making this new dream a reality. Together they convinced the Ursulines recently established in Provence to send them two members to instruct the others in their tasks; they then set about providing the necessary physical and institutional structures for the new order.<sup>48</sup>

Madame Acarie's biographers have tended to play down her arch-Catholic politics and her involvement in the Catholic League. Her most recent biographer, Father Bruno de Jésus-Marie, for example, acknowledges that Pierre Acarie's active service to the Catholic Union earned him the nickname of the "lackey of the League," but he insists that Madame Acarie's "conception of the Church Militant had absolutely nothing revolutionary about it, and the lack of dignity shown [by partisans of the League], especially among men of the cloth, must have been repugnant to her."<sup>49</sup> The evidence Father Bruno provides, how-

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<sup>47</sup>Hervé, *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation*, 26-27, citing testimony of Mère Jeanne de Jésus (Séguier) from the Procès informatif and Michel de Marillac (déposition extrajudiciaire).

<sup>48</sup>Gallement, *La vie de Jacques Gallement*, 98-103. See also Leymont, *Madame de Sainte-Beuve*.

<sup>49</sup>Bruno, *La belle Acarie*, 89.

ever, suggests that it is he, and not Madame Acarie, who was repelled by the League's "lack of dignity." Citing the Carmelite Sister Marie de Saint-Joseph, he describes Acarie, her face flushed with emotion, standing with one foot raised and ready to stomp, and saying "Ah, if I but held the last heretic [in my power] and he didn't want to convert, I would crush him with my force."<sup>50</sup> The same passion is evident in her prayers for the afflicted Church, in which she cries out against the "impious and perfidious Huguenots" and asks how long they will reign. She calls on God to protect the Church's defenders and assist the Catholics, and she begs him not to desert them: "Oh, my heart, my love, and my all, will you forsake us in the end? Oh! Don't abandon us."<sup>51</sup>

Madame Acarie served the League in the only ways open to a woman of her station. She offered it her prayers, but she also took part in its processions, nursed its soldiers, shared her food with those left starving because of its wars, encouraged poorer neighbors, and helped them through this difficult period—a time she later idealized as an "age of gold, when people thought not about eating but rather about praying to God."<sup>52</sup> She probably also consented—at least up to a point—to her husband's generous financial contributions to the League, but notarial records that might confirm this no longer exist.<sup>53</sup>

Members of Madame Acarie's circle recognized the extraordinary *quality* of her spiritual gifts, but the *character* of her spirituality did not set her apart from others of her generation. The spiritual biographies of numerous other women who came of age in the last two decades of the sixteenth century reveal the same entwining of political loyalties and religious sentiments, but also the same ascetic and mystical piety, in which Christ's passion appears as both an object of continual meditation and as an act to be emulated through one's own suffering. Madame de Maignelay, a friend of Barbe Acarie's but also one of the first Ladies of Charity (and so a link with the following generation as well), illustrates the same tendencies on all counts, from her adherence to the League to her intense longing, once widowed, to join one of the new, austere religious orders and her deliberate adoption of a regime of

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 79, citing testimony of Marie de Saint-Joseph (Castellet) and Marie de Sainte-Ursule (Thoine) in the Procès apostolique.

<sup>51</sup>"Exercices spirituels," in *ibid.*, 740; more generally, 736-41.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 49 and 99-109; Hervé, *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation*, 112-17.

<sup>53</sup>Under the customary laws of the Paris region, she would have had to consent to any alienation of property that might affect her dower rights. In practice, to forestall later lawsuits, this meant that almost all contracts for married men involving the alienation of significant amounts of property carried the consent of their wives.

fasting, scourging, and other penitential practices.<sup>54</sup> When her powerful family organized the support of all of Paris's spiritual leaders to oppose her taking of religious vows, the marquise submitted to the advice of her spiritual director—not surprisingly, a Capuchin—that she reconcile Mary and Martha by living a religious life while remaining in the world. Thus began a life of active charity, of nursing indigent patients in the Hôtel Dieu, visiting prisoners in Paris jails, and aiding the Parisian poor by paying their rent, buying medicine and food, providing dowries for their daughters and apprenticeships for their sons. The marquise de Maignelay was famous for stopping her carriage to pick up some young prostitute in the street and trying to win her over to repentance. To this end, the marquise was instrumental in founding a madgalen house for reformed prostitutes, and she personally paid the pensions of a number of young women who entered there. She gave a vast fortune to her various charities, but she gave herself as well, and it is clear that the moving spirit behind her actions was the deliberate imitation of Christ. We are told that she spent hours prostrate before the crucifix, contemplating the broken body that, “like a mute voice, told her to root out all the imperfections of her actions; like an inspiration that spoke to her heart, persuaded her absolutely to flee the world, if she wished like him to live and die constantly in self-denial and in suffering.”<sup>55</sup>

Louise de Marillac's spirituality shows many of the same themes, from her youthful longing to join the Capucines, to her private austerities, to a “certain spiritual avidity”—a tendency toward multiple penances, prayers, and examinations of conscience—that her spiritual director thought wise to moderate.<sup>56</sup> Was Louise's powerful impulse to charity similarly rooted in the imitation of Christ? This is a more complicated question. Yes, it was rooted in the imitation of Christ, and yet the very meaning of the phrase “the imitation of Christ” seems to have changed for this generation. Louise wrote in her *Première retraite*, “I must attach

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<sup>54</sup>Charlotte Marguerite de Gondi, the marquise de Maignelay, was the sister of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, general of the galleys and an important patron of Vincent de Paul.

<sup>55</sup>[Bauduen], *La vie admirable*, 151-52; more generally on her charity, 205-19 and 245-66. See also [Senault], *Oraison funebre de haute et puissante dame Charolte Marguerite de Gondy, Marquise de Maignelay. Prononcée en la presence de Monseigneur l'Archevesque de Corinthe, Coadjuteur de Paris. celebrant pontificalement dans l'Eglise des prestres de l'Oratoire de Jesus* (Paris: 1650); and Testament de Madame la Marquise de Maignelay (Paris: 1659):

<sup>56</sup>*La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines: Documents*, ed. Sister Elisabeth Charpy ([Paris]: 1989), 979; Document 830: Letter from Jean-Pierre Camus to Louise de Marillac. See also Dirvin, Louise de Marillac, 32 and 39.

myself strongly to Jesus by the holiest imitation of His life." "All the actions of the Son of God are for our example and instruction," she added, "but principally His life of mingled action and contemplation."<sup>57</sup> We have moved here beyond the intense focus on Christ's passion that was for an earlier generation virtually synonymous with the *imitatio Christi*. We have arrived at sentiments that seem more familiar, more comfortably modern, than those expressed by Marie Du Drac, Barbe Acarie, or Madame de Maignelay.

As we have heard from Father Deville, we have Pierre de Bérulle—and Vincent himself—to thank for restoring to view the evangelical Jesus, teacher by his words and actions, almost lost from sight in the anguished spirituality of the era of religious wars. But that is another subject and goes beyond my ambition here, which was rather to show the emergence of a new ethic of charity from the crucible of civil war and the penitential piety to which these wars gave rise. If that new ethic only reached its full fruition when modeled upon the "mingled action and contemplation" of Christ's life, it did not reach this point without a long period of suffering under the cross. It is that darker period that I have tried to illuminate today.

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<sup>57</sup> As cited in Dirvin, *Louise de Marillac*, 65.